

# Swami Smaranananda



**Ramakrishna Math**

Belur Math

Howrah 711202

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## SWAMI SMARANANANDA

Once a young monk put this question to a senior swami at Belur Math, which is very relevant in the context of spiritual life: 'What is the *sadhana* that you predominantly practise? I don't see you meditating or doing japa for long hours, nor do I see you going on pilgrimage trips, or going for *tapasya* and the like. What is the *sadhana* then that keeps you going on the spiritual path?' The senior swami was not annoyed or irritated in the least.

Smilingly he replied: 'Remember two things: first, try to live the Vedantic truth of *Brahma satyam, jaganmithya* and next, surrender to Sri Ramakrishna like a simple, helpless child'. He continued: 'From the moment I came into the Ramakrishna Order having been convinced about the ephemeral nature of everything in this world, I have realized two things: one, absolute clarity about the goal of life (God-realization which is the same as *Atma/Brahma-Jnana*); and two, absolute clarity about the path that I have to walk to realize this Goal. Although the Goal and the path were both absolutely clear, I knew I could not walk faster than my body and mind would permit. So I walked the spiritual path at my own pace consistent with my inner and outer strength, depending on Sri Ramakrishna. I was never restless that I should attain something quickly nor did I ever lose sight of the steadiness and pace of my walk which depended upon my physical and mental capacity. The secret is: Give yourself up to Sri Ramakrishna, allowing Him to use you, your talents if any, your body and mind for His cause, as He may think fit, as He may ordain. Always depend upon Him, try to remember Him always and work for Him. He will take care of the rest.' This senior swami was Swami Smaranananda who became the 16<sup>th</sup> President of the Ramakrishna Sangha, known for his simplicity and utter lack of ostentation.

Swami Smarananandaji was born at village Andami in the Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu, on 25 December 1929. His father R. Venkataraman and mother Subbalakshmi named this child Jayaraman. He was hence known in the Sangha as Jayaram Maharaj. His father worked in the army for some time and then came to work in the India Security Press at Nashik Road, Maharashtra. Jayaram spent many of his boyhood years in the house of his father's sister (*pisi*), Alamelu, in Madras (now Chennai) and also in Trichy district's Kulittalai section on the banks of the river Kaveri. He studied in the Corporation School

in classes 2 through 4 and then shifted to Nashik. After a year's time he came back to Madras and got admitted directly to class 6 in the Hindu High School. At the start of the second world war Alamelu shifted to Kulittalai and Jayaram studied up to class 8 here in the Board High School. Soon they returned to Madras and Jayaram was admitted to class 9 in the same Hindu High School. Despite some health setback during this period (which in fact was to trouble him for a long time), he passed the class 9 exam. In the meanwhile the second world war had escalated and the Japanese were bombarding Madras. The family returned to Kulittalai where Jayaram was admitted to class 10 in the Board High School. His health too now started to improve. Maharaj remembered the words of his headmaster of this school who had once affectionately patted Jayaram's back and said: "You have to do well in the exams and must get the first rank." And it did happen that way. In the class 11 exam (called SSLC in those days) he came out with flying colours. Immediately after the exams he left for Nashik.

In Nashik, at his father's insistence, he paid more attention to his health and underwent K.V. Iyer's postal physical exercise course owing to which his health started improving. He joined the Nashik Hindu Gymkhana to play badminton. Nashik did not have any good college then and his father could not afford to keep the son in a hostel to pursue his college studies. Jayaram enrolled for a one-year Diploma course in Business Organization conducted by the Indian Chamber of Commerce. Later he started studying for another postal tuition course of the London Chamber of Commerce which, however, he could not complete. Through his father's efforts he got a temporary clerk's job in the India Security Press.

One particular incident relating to this job he would narrate in later times. The Security Press was then headed by an Englishman named R.C. Chapman. The Second World War having ended, the Olympic Games were held in England for the first time. Mr Chapman went to England to attend the Olympics. On his return, he asked young Jayaram to see him in his office. The other employees were naturally surprised at this—why should this young man of hardly eighteen years be called by the top man! The boss had learnt from Jayaram's father that the young man was an avid philatelist. Mr. Chapman gifted him the 'First Day Cover' of the Olympics which he had brought from England. Jayaram was very touched by his kindness.

His search for a job in Bombay was going on and finally in March

1949, having topped the entrance examination, he joined as a clerk in the Reserve Bank of India. After shifting his residence from place to place for some time, he finally settled, along with a few colleagues, in a house at Worli Naka which was rented by the RBI for its employees. He had a grinding routine during this phase: Before going for office work to RBI, he would attend the Jai Hind College (a morning college) where he enrolled for the B.A. course. The office work would continue up to 5 pm after which he would attend classes at the Laxmi College of Commerce for a Diploma Course in Banking. He remembered that he ranked first in the final examination and received the first prize at the hands of Sri Gaganvihari Lallubhai Mehta, Ambassador of India to the USA. He was then studying for the 2-year CAIIB (Certified Associateship at the Indian Institute of Bankers) course, of which he cleared all papers barring two. Being a Government employee, his services were utilised during the first census of India and again as an officer in the first general election of India in 1951. He also was part of the group who bade farewell to Shri C. D. Deshmukh, the first Indian Governor of the Reserve Bank of India. This way three years from 1949 to 1952 passed by.

Despite his strenuous life he found time to follow some pursuits close to his heart: watching cricket matches, seeing selected movies and reading books. He would later say: "Generally I would see the classic movies like 'Gone with the Wind', 'A Song to Remember' and 'Random Harvest'. I used to see good Hindi movies also. One movie, 'Mirabai' I saw in three languages, in Tamil, Hindi and Marathi". He was a cricket fan. He would happily say: "I have witnessed Cricket matches in the Brabourne Stadium. I didn't see any matches in the Wankhede Stadium. One Test match I remember vividly, which was played between India and West Indies. There were the 3-Ws (Sir Frank **Worrell**, Sir Everton **Weekes** and Sir Clyde **Walcott**) in the West Indies team and in the Indian team were Lala Amarnath, Dattu Phadkar, etc.". Even when he was staying at the headquarters in Belur Math he would join the others to see cricket matches on TV on the first floor of the headquarters building (called Saradananda Bhavan today).

All this apart, Jayaram was a voracious reader of classical English fiction as well as various other books. As advised by his father, Jayaram read Napoleon Hill's *'Think and Grow Rich'*, *'The Master Key to Riches'*, etc. Jayaram also read Mahatma Gandhi's books: *'Self-Indulgence vs Self-control'* and *'The Story of My Experiments with Truth.'*

The fast pace itself changed the course of young Jayaram's life. He and Surendra Nath Menon, a resident in the same building, would commute to the office together. Jayaram asked Menon one day, "Well, Mr. Menon, every day we go to the office at 10 o'clock and come back at 5 pm, eat and drink, go to see a movie, watch a cricket match, and thus be employed for 30 years or so, marry, have children, and then pass away. What is life meant for—what is the meaning of all this?" Menon got frightened and said—"Don't talk like that. Everybody cannot be a Mahatma Gandhi." Jayaram replied, "I don't want to be Mahatma Gandhi or anybody else, I want to know the meaning of life. I want answers to these questions. Why should we do all these things?" By then, he had also read a few books of Swami Vivekananda. All this was bringing about a change in Jayaram's thinking.

Often he would go for solitary walks to the Worli beach and quietly sit on the huge rocks on the seashore. He would watch the setting sun. One day, sitting there, he thought—"Well, these rocks are so big, the sea is so vast, the sky looks infinite, then what am I—a little speck on the surface of the earth? Why give so much importance to myself?" Flash came the answer: It is true that you look like a speck on the surface of the earth, but within you a great presence is there which is greater than all these. This thought came forcefully, almost like someone speaking to him, and this idea became imprinted in Jayaram's mind. He had not, as yet, read the Bhagavad Gita or the Upanishads.

Jayaram himself has narrated his feelings of those days: "I read Gandhiji's autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Gandhiji has laid great emphasis on *Brahmacharya* in this book. I was impressed by that. Gandhiji said that whenever his mind would become weak he continuously repeated *Ramanama* and that is why I too got interested in the repetition of *Ramanama*. After office hours, sometimes I went to Marine Drive; that is a fashionable but quiet area. I walked up to the seashore repeating *Ramanama*. I got immensely attracted to *Ramanama*. I read in Napoleon Hill's book that (i) one must have an ideal in life, (ii) one should have a great desire to realize that ideal and then (iii) one must put forth enough perseverance to actualize it. So I began thinking—'What should be my ideal in life?' I imagined myself as the richest man in the world, or as the Prime Minister of India. But I found none of these things satisfying. 'What is the Truth?'—this question was haunting me. One day I was travelling on the upper deck of a bus. I had been thinking for many days—'What am I to do? What

should be my ideal in life?’ An answer seemed to come from within as if someone was speaking—‘I (You) have to become a monk’. I set out to become a monk after this.” He narrated this to a young sadhu one day saying that this was the ‘First Awakening’ in his life. There was no looking back after this. Nothing could now distract him from this ideal.

He learnt of the Ramakrishna Math at Khar in Bombay (Mumbai) and started going there on weekends. He would repeat *Ramanama* so intensely at night that his pillow would be drenched with his tears. He purchased several books from the Math: Swamiji’s *Thoughts of Power* and *Jnana-Yoga* and later, the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. Reading these books became part of his daily routine. He read in the Gospel one day Sri Ramakrishna saying, ‘Go into solitude and pray intensely for three days, you will realize God.’ He decided to give this a try. He accordingly wrote two postcards: one to Mr. Menon, requesting him to return some books he had taken from the Math library and another to his father living in Nasik, saying, ‘I am going away, do not worry about me’. But on his way to the railway station he decided not to post those letters and instead went to the Bombay Ashrama.

As Swami Sambuddhanandaji (a disciple of the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi) the Head of the Ashrama was not then at the Math, young Jayaram met Swami Aparnanandaji (Satya Maharaj) and said to him that he wanted to join the Order and he would not go back. Consolingly, Aparnanandaji said to him that one could not join the Order suddenly on an impulse like this. He asked him to keep visiting the Ashrama regularly so that after some time, he could join. Somewhat consoled, Jayaram returned to his Worli residence. However, from then on nothing in life interested him. All Sundays were now spent at the Ashrama. On weekdays he would get up at 4 am daily, go to the Ashrama shrine first and then go for other work using the local trains. He spent more and more time reading Swamiji’s books. Sometimes he would be so much absorbed in reading a book on the train that he would miss his destination and proceed 2 or 3 stations further.

From June 1951, he started staying in the Students’ Home of Ramakrishna Math, Khar. Around this time, he was wondering who his *ishta* (chosen ideal) was. One day, while meditating in the shrine, mentally, he asked Sri Ramakrishna, ‘Who is my *ishta*?’ Flash came the answer, as if directly from Sri Thakur’s picture in the shrine, ‘I am your *ishta*.’ Then onwards, he accepted Sri Ramakrishna as his *ishta*, though he was also devoted to Sri Rama, Sri Krishna and Sri Rajarajeswari.

After writing the final BA exam he joined the Order as a Brahmachari on 28 February, 1952. He later learned that he had passed the BA exam but he never bothered to collect his marksheet or certificate. He was told by his co-students that he passed the examination with very good marks.

After joining the Ramakrishna Order at Bombay Ashrama, Jayaram wrote to his father about it. An interesting exchange of letters took place between the father and the son. But the son's burning renunciation and love for monastic life prevailed and he could get his father's blessings for his chosen course of life. His father soon visited the Bombay ashrama to see his son and there told Swami Sambuddhananda that he had the darshan of Swami Shivanandaji (Mahapurush Maharaj) in Madras. Swami Sambuddhanandaji replied to Jayaram's father that it was owing to this blessed *darshan* that his son had joined the Order!

Jayaram's first assignment in the Ashrama was to manage the shrine *bhandar*. The rituals at the temple in Bombay Ashrama were the same as in Belur Math. Naturally the workload was heavy—from early morning to 9 pm one would be busy except, of course, with a break of a few hours during the afternoon. Swami Ashutoshanandaji (Batakrishna Maharaj--called Batuk Maharaj), a disciple of Mahapurush Maharaj, was the *pujari* and he did not know English and the just-joined-Jayaram did not (then) know Bengali. This led to humorous situations! One such incident Jayaram Maharaj would talk about often. It is common practice while working in a shrine to wash the palms of the hand with Ganga water (or plain water) after touching offered flowers, fruits, sweets, puja vessels, etc. The pujari Maharaj had to teach this custom to the novice. And he would say in his own style: 'See, Jayaram, this thing, *Jhutha* (used/defiled), hand wash!' Jayaram would understand the lesson in its correct perspective and would do the needful immediately! Batuk Maharaj's affectionate attitude enabled Jayaram to learn the new tasks comfortably.

In December 1952, Sambuddhanandaji told Jayaram that Most Revered Swami Shankaranandaji Maharaj, President of the Order, would be coming to Bombay and he should receive *mantra-diksha* (spiritual initiation) from him. Jayaram began to wonder how to accept someone whom he had never seen as his *Guru*. He thought to himself—'let him come, I will see him, and if I feel like receiving initiation from him, I will do so.' Otherwise, he decided that he would leave the Ashrama and go to the Himalayas.



Revered Maharaj arrived on 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> December 1952. Getting down from the car, he sat in the small hall, in the old Math building. All monastic members including Jayaram offered their *pranams* to him; the devotees too offered *pranams* after this. Coming out of the hall Jayaram was gazing at the majestic figure of Revered President Maharaj through the window. He felt indescribable attraction to the Maharaj. And decided, 'Yes. I can receive *mantra-diksha* from him. He looks so holy. Therefore no going to the Himalayas!'

On 15<sup>th</sup> December, 1952, Revered Maharaj blessed Jayaram with *mantra-diksha*. Revered President Maharaj stayed in Bombay for about 15 days and thence left for Madras. During this period Jayaram mustered enough courage to meet Revered Maharaj twice. He narrated these events himself: (1) "One day, early morning I went to meet Revered Maharaj wanting to ask something. Maharaj had such a dominating personality and grave voice that all would be afraid to approach him easily. The moment I came near him he said in his grave voice—'N-o-t s-o e-a-r-l-y'. Immediately, I ran away." (2) "Next time I asked Revered Maharaj—"Maharaj, Swamiji has said that Puja should be done with minimum expenditure. Here Durga Puja is done on a grand scale. Revered President Maharaj said, 'Swamiji himself started the Durga Puja in Belur Math.' I was terribly scared and came away."

Jayaram would narrate another incident later. "I approached Swami Suparnanandaji (Satinath Maharaj), who was the Secretary to Revered President Maharaj, for receiving a *japamala* (rosary). He said, 'No need for *japamala*, Revered Maharaj will be very angry if you ask him for a *japamala*.' As a rule Shankaranandaji Maharaj was not in favour of using *japamalas*.

Within a few days, Jayaram had learnt to sing the *arati* (vesper) songs and was conducting the prayer. He also learnt cycling and typing owing to the demands of ashrama work. He would type at a good speed using just his two index fingers and two thumbs!—a practice which stood him in good stead when serving at the Advaita Ashrama. With his characteristic humour, in later years he would recall that he could not learn cycling properly and gave it up totally after two incidents: (a) He was once going on the main street on a bicycle for some work. Suddenly a child fell almost in front of the cycle. To save the child he took a little deviation and, being unable to control the cycle, fell into a drain on the side of the road! Fortunately he didn't sustain any major injury. (b) On another occasion while riding the cycle on the main road

he didn't notice that the traffic signal had turned red. Vehicles from the other direction were moving. As he cycled ahead he heard someone shouting from behind: *Hey gururaaj, kahan marne jaa rahe ho?* (Hey holy man why are you rushing to death?). He stopped immediately and turning back saw that a policeman had alerted him!

In later years Maharaj narrated this touching incident: 'In my first year at the Bombay Ashrama I was working in the *Thakur Bhandar*. A boy called Gopinath, about 8 or 9 years old, would come daily during evening Arati. The boy asked me one day, "Maharaj, why *Pujari* Maharaj is throwing flowers around and doing other things? Is it not enough if you have devotion to God?" Another day, I asked him, "Gopinath what will you do when you grow up?" "I will become a *sadhu*, but not like you people. I will go to a solitary place and meditate on God." After perhaps a few months I noticed his absence. And one day when his father came I asked him why Gopinath was not coming? His father replied sadly, "He was suffering from diphtheria. We admitted him to the hospital but he died. Before passing away he uttered the name of *Sri Krishna* three times." The boy must have attained *mukti*. He must have been a *sadhaka* in earlier life. A little of *karma* was left. That was finished in this birth.'

After working for some months in the temple shrine, Jayaram approached Sambuddhanandaji for leave. The swami, however, rebuked him saying 'you are an active young man. Why do you want leave? Perhaps you want to go Rishikesh and get overnight sannyasa? Moreover, drought relief is being started in Ahmednagar district. Instead of offering yourself for relief work, you are asking for leave. Are you not ashamed?' Jayaram said, 'All right, I will go for relief work.' Sambuddhanandaji was highly pleased and said, 'That is like a good boy!' After the night class that day he said to the others, 'You are all hopeless. You see this boy has volunteered to go for relief work!'

Swami Raghaveswaranandaji (Naren Maharaj) was heading the relief work at Ahmednagar. Adinathanandaji (Kalida Maharaj) and Soumyanandaji (2<sup>nd</sup> Naren Maharaj) were also in the relief team. Jayaram was the only person in this group who could speak Marathi. So he was managing the free-kitchen at Ahmednagar. *Dal* and *bhakri* (a thick *roti* made of *Jowar-millet* and *atta*) would be cooked every day for the rural folk.

After four months at the Ahmednagar relief site, Sambuddhanandaji asked him to return to Bombay. Jayaram's leave-request for 8/10 days'

to visit Ajanta, Ellora and Omkareshwar, was granted. It was difficult to travel in these regions at that time. There were hardly any boarding and lodging facilities too. Despite all odds, Jayaram managed to have *darshan* of *Ghrishneswar* (one of the 12 *Jyotirlingas*). After visiting Ellora next, he came to Daulatabad and from there to Ajanta. Omkareshwar, however, eluded him and he returned to Bombay Ashram.

He was now asked to assist Swami Nishwanandaji (Balakrishnan Maharaj) in the General office. So shrine work was over for him. Nishwanandaji was transferred to Rangoon, Burma (Yangon, Myanmar) and in his place came Swami Ishanandaji (Parameswar Maharaj). But, after some time, Ishanandaji started looking after the Dispensary, and Jayaram became the General Office in-charge and also personal assistant to Sambuddhanandaji. Since returning from relief work, Jayaram had been asking for leave again and again to visit Belur Math.

Sambuddhanandaji was invited to attend the installation of Holy Mother's statue on *Akshaya Tritiya* day (April 9, 1954) and extension of the temple *nat-mandira* at Jayrambati which formed a part of Holy Mother's Birth Centenary concluding celebrations. Thus, one evening in April 1954 Sambuddhanandaji called him and said, 'Tomorrow morning you will go with me to Calcutta by plane. Get ready.' It was indeed a dream come true for this junior Brahmachari!

The flight by a Viking propeller plane took 5 hours from Bombay to reach Calcutta! When the plane was flying over the Ganga, Maharaj poked him and said, 'See, Belur Math'. So Jayaram had his first *darshan* of Belur Math from the sky! The airways bus took them to Great Eastern Hotel, where a car, from the (old) Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture on Russa Road, was waiting. Swami Nityaswarupanandaji, Head of the Institute, was a friend of Sambuddhanandaji. Fresh after bath, lunch and rest, they first went to *Mayer-badi* (Udbodhan) at Baghbazar. Next they went to Ma Kali's temple at Dakshineswar. It was thrilling for Jayaram to see the places associated with Sri Sri Thakur and Sri Sri Ma—of course, all in a hurry!

From there they came to Belur Math. Sambuddhanandaji left for Jayrambati, asking Jayaram to join him after a few days at Belur Math. Here he met Swami Aparnanandaji (Satya Maharaj, also Holy Mother's disciple), then Head of the Almora centre who often visited Bombay Ashrama to collect donations. Since he did not know anyone else, they

were together most of the time. Aparnanandaji showed him Belur Math in detail and also took him to some local centres.

While at Belur Math, an interesting incident happened. Jayaram was staying on the first floor of the Girish Memorial building. One day he went down to wash his clothes and when he returned, found that the key to the room which he had left on the cornice as usual, was missing. While he was searching for the key he heard a stern voice, 'What are you searching for?' He looked up and saw Revered Vireshwaranandaji. He said, 'the key'. 'Where did you keep it?' 'I think I kept it here on the cornice.' 'Don't say "I think", say where you kept it?' Then he said, 'here'. Then showing the key in his hand Maharaj said, 'Here is the key; I will keep it with me. You fellows are so careless; you don't see who is inside the room but just lock it up.' Jayaram realised that something was amiss. Immediately he offered *pranams* to Revered Maharaj saying 'I am new to the place and so I didn't know it'. Maharaj too mellowed down and gave him the key.

After staying at Belur Math for 11 days Jayaram left for Jayrambati with Aparnanandaji. Later, walking through the paddy fields, he reached Kamarpukur. The Head of Kamarpukur centre, Swami Vagalanandaji (Shrish Maharaj, a disciple of Mahapurush Maharaj), gave him a choice of staying in Thakur's '*Baithak-khana*' (drawing room behind Thakur's mango tree) or in the guest-house. Naturally Jayaram preferred Thakur's room. Vagalanandaji even arranged for some '*rasam*' for Jayaram despite so many guests being present. Jayaram was very much touched by this loving hospitality and happily returned to Jayrambati.

The centenary celebrations in Jayrambati were a great event. Nearly 4000 delegates from all over India had assembled there ignoring the heat and sweat. He took part in the various activities—*Yajna-kunda* decoration, serving food, etc. On 9<sup>th</sup> April, the main day, about 25,000 people took *Prasad*. People from all surrounding villages had come. Jayaram Maharaj would recall that the old ladies in the village were saying, 'Oh, what a great congregation for our "Saru" (Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother)! (Amader '*Sarur jonya era ki kanda na korche*!)). This was an unforgettable event which he cherished all through his life, knowing that Holy Mother had been very gracious to him.

He stayed for 11 days at Jayrambati, participating in the mart of joy and then left on a pilgrimage. Staying at Varanasi for 3-4 days to begin with, he spent another 3-4 days at Lucknow. The next halt was at

Almora from where he thought of visiting Mayavati but dismissed the idea knowing that Sambuddhanandaji would be doubly angered and proceeded instead to Kankhal, from where he visited Rishikesh also. Here he met Swami Sivanandaji of the Divine Life Society who gifted Jayaram some books. After meeting Swami Saradeshanandaji (Gopesh Maharaj, a disciple of the Holy Mother) at Vrindaban and a brief halt at Mathura, he started his return journey to Bombay via Delhi and Agra.

In 1956, Jayaram had to again come to Belur Math for his *Brahmacharya-diksha*. Revered President Maharaj Swami Shankaranandaji initiated him into *Brahmacharya* on 14<sup>th</sup> March 1956, the *Janma-tithi* day of Sri Ramakrishna, and gave him the name *Brahmachari* Samvitchaitanya. After this he visited, along with Swami Pratyaganandaji (the singer-and-composer swami, Bibhuti Maharaj) the ancestral house and birthplace of Swami Vivekananda. He met Swamiji's second brother, Mahendra Nath Dutta. Jayaram would remember this visit in later years thus: "It was not a happy experience for me. Having heard me enquiring about the birthplace of Swamiji, Mahim Babu was annoyed and said, 'Nowadays, people come here and ask—where Swamiji was born, where he did this thing, that thing, etc. Go through his teachings and try to practice them.'"

In the year 1956, Swami Madhavanandaji the then General Secretary of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, went to America for medical treatment accompanied by Swami Nirvananandaji. They were returning after the trip. Seeing off monks at the airport and receiving them, was one of the assignments given to Jayaram Maharaj. He went to the airport to receive them along with some others. They stayed in Bombay Ashrama just for a day. There were no ceiling or pedestal fans in the Ashrama then. Jayaram borrowed a table fan from a Parsi lady devotee. Madhavanandaji asked him to give the fan to Nirvananandaji who, refusing the privilege, asked him to take it back to Madhavanandaji. These feelings of mutual love and concern, deeply impressed the young Jayaram. He fanned Nirvananandaji with a hand-fan for some time.

Night-*prasad* was served at 9 o'clock. For the past half hour, Madhavanandaji being the General Secretary of the Order, was discussing various issues with the monks. Jayaram thinking this to be an opportune time asked him for a long leave. But Madhavanandaji replied that leave would not be possible, but 'if you want, we will give you a transfer'. Jayaram agreed. Being thus occupied, Madhavanandaji could not attend to his routine spiritual practices. Jayaram naturally

asked him whether he should bring dinner-*prasad* to his room. At this Madhavanandaji replied, 'Was I not doing Thakur's work all this while?'

He reminisced joyfully about the visits of Swamis Vireshwaranandaji and Bhuteshanandaji to Bombay during his stay there. He felt blessed to render some personal *seva* to Vireshwaranandaji and would also type some of his letters. He would narrate an interesting incident regarding Bhuteshanandaji. One morning Jayaram was plucking flowers for his personal shrine. Bhuteshanandaji, who was head of Rajkot centre then, saw this and said 'Hello (*oi je* was the exact expression), you are plucking flowers. This should be done only after flowers for the temple shrine have been taken.'

The Bombay ashrama laid the foundation for Jayaram's monastic life. From a comfortable job with the Reserve Bank of India he migrated here, to the life of an all-renouncing monk. He had the rare good fortune to interact here with many spiritual luminaries of the Order.

In June 1958 he was posted to the Calcutta branch of the Advaita Ashrama, at 4 Wellington Lane, to take up the work of the City Editor of the *Prabuddha Bharata*. An episode relating to this posting, Jayaram Maharaj would remember in later years: "When Prabhu Maharaj posted me to the Advaita Ashrama, Madhavanandaji was the General Secretary. But Prabhu Maharaj used to look after most of the activities. He wrote to the then Manager of Advaita Ashrama Swami Advayanandaji, 'Thy need is greater than mine. For this reason, I am sending ... to the Advaita Ashrama. Otherwise, we wanted him here (at the headquarters)...'. Around this time one day I said to Prabhu Maharaj, 'I didn't have the opportunity to join the *Mysore Study Circle*. The *Training Centre* is also closed for me. He simply said, 'Not necessary for you.' "

While in Advaita Ashrama, he would daily go for a morning walk, his normal route being: Dharmatala Street-Esplanade-Red Road (till the Fort William junction) and back. While walking he would repeat verses from the *Vishnu Sahashranama* and *Lalita Sahashranama stotras*, which he had committed to memory in childhood. After the Advaita Ashrama was moved to Dehi Entally Road in 1961, he shifted his morning walk to the Park Circus Maidan. He remembered two incidents in this connection: (1) He would see one very devoted Muslim gentleman, walking around the ground, repeating the Lord's name keeping count on a *japamala* and (2) He would see another person known to him walking around the ground but never speaking to him. One day suddenly this person walked up to Jayaram Maharaj and said,

‘Let me have a little *sadhu-sanga*.’ Later on, Maharaj learnt that the reason for this impulsive *sadhu-sanga* was to get his son admitted to the Ramakrishna Mission’s School, Narendrapur!

A little before Jayaram Maharaj was to leave for Mayavati, Swami Ananyanandaji, Editor of the *Prabuddha Bharata*, explained to him the importance of proof-reading and imprinted on his mind how small lapses could lead to blunders. Swami Vimalanandaji, a scholar-swami, was staying at that time at the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture and would sometimes come to the Advaita Ashrama. One day he said to Jayaram Maharaj, “Look here, Holy Mother has told us ‘not to find fault with others’. But now, working for the *Prabuddha Bharata*, you should find fault carefully, i.e. unearth liberally mistakes in proof sheets coming from the press!”

In later years, Jayaram Maharaj would narrate that he and Ananyanandaji formulated an innovative method of proof-reading: “In those days, we were to get galley proofs (of *Prabuddha Bharata*) from Calcutta for our proofreading. No computers in those days! It was arranged between the two of us that: half of the proofs will be seen by him and the remaining half by me. After my proofreading, the editor Swami would re-read the proof and *vice-versa*. If the editor finds any mistakes which escaped my notice, that would be debited to my account. If I found any mistakes in the proofs which were not detected by him that would be debited to his account! This game ensured that the *Prabuddha Bharata* got published without any mistakes.”

Despite such checks, sometimes mistakes did creep in. Gambhiranandaji Maharaj, then President of Advaita Ashrama, was translating ‘*Shivananda Vani*’ from Bangla to English. Through oversight he spelt *Kumbha Fair (Mela)* as *Kumbha Fare!* The editor, sub-editor and Jayaram Maharaj in Calcutta had all seen the proof, but this error escaped everyone’s attention—strange indeed!

Time flies and soon it was 28<sup>th</sup> February 1960, the *Janma-tithi* of Sri Ramakrishna. Revered President Maharaj Swami Shankaranandaji, blessed Jayaram Maharaj (Brahmachari Samvitchaitanya) with *Sannyasa-diksha* on this auspicious day, and gave him the new name, Swami Smaranananda. Maharaj would recall two incidents in connection with his *Sannyasa-diksha*. (a) On the *diksha*-day: *Sannyasa* aspirants generally fast the whole day; some do not drink water even (*nir-jala*). One of the candidates felt some discomfort owing to this. The matter was reported to Revered President Maharaj who

immediately called them all and said, 'I do not mean to kill you.' He clarified that those who needed could eat or drink as per their necessity. (b) The day after *sannyasa-diksha*: All the newly ordained monks met Revered President Maharaj in a group, eager to receive some instructions. Revered Maharaj started with the sentence: 'Today you all have resolved to renounce your ego...'

Maharaj cherished the above two incidents very much and later, as President of the Order, he would convey this to the newly ordained sannyasins. Incidentally, he also said that when he got the name 'Smaranananda' he was delighted because *smarana-manana* was the main *sadhana* that he performed, or as he would say with characteristic humility, he *could perform* with his limited capacity.

Maharaj would narrate another significant event of the year 1960: Durga Puja was celebrated from 27 to 30 September in Belur Math. He had thought of going to the Math on the *Saptami* day but he was feeling a bit feverish. At about 4 am that day, he had a dream: He was coming out of a house (later on he identified this as Balaram Mandir). When he was about to come out, he saw the Holy Mother sitting on a rock with some other ladies. He immediately did (*bhumishta*) *pranam* to Her and was feeling, 'If only She puts out Her feet, I can keep my head on Her feet and do *pranam*.' As soon as he thought so, the Holy Mother put out Her feet and he did *pranams* to Holy Mother heartily. The Mother too put Her hands on his head and said a few words of blessings to him. The dream then ended and he woke up. He could not recollect what Holy Mother said in the dream. This dream was always vivid in his memory. Mother's soothing Divine touch removed in a flash all his worries, anxiety and tension. The Mother *Rajarajeshwari* whom he had been praying to from his boyhood days showered Her grace on Maharaj by surrendering him at Ma Sarada Devi's lotus feet. Little wonder then that his picture is today worshipped by countless devotees.

On 8 December, 1960, Revered Swami Madhavanandaji Maharaj, the then General Secretary of the Order, formally inaugurated the new premises of the Calcutta branch of the Advaita Ashrama at 5, Dehi Entally Road. As Madhavanandaji touched the floor of the premises with his hand by way of salutation, the assembled monks of the Advaita Ashrama light-heartedly reminded him that this was Advaita Ashrama! He replied, 'That is for you people!' Be that as it may, all the activities of the Calcutta branch of the Advaita Ashrama were shifted to this new campus in March 1961.



In April 1961, Smarananandaji was sent to Mayavati to assist Swami Ananyanandaji, Editor of the *Prabuddha Bharata*. Before leaving for Mayavati, Smarananandaji came to Belur Math to get the blessings of Revered President Maharaj, his guru. As soon as Revered Maharaj, saw him, he asked 'Why do I not see you nowadays?' And when told that he was going to Mayavati, he reminisced a little about his days at Mayavati.

Smarananandaji had for a long time been dreaming of living in the Himalayas. And now that materialized unexpectedly! With dense forests all around, the silvery snow peaks glittering in the morning sun, the azure sky above, the birds, the flowers, the mystic silence ... breathtaking indeed. Revered Swami Gambhiranandaji, the then President of the Advaita Ashrama left with Smarananandaji for Mayavati in April 1961.

After a brief halt at Varanasi and Lucknow, they reached Tanakpur. In the morning they were to leave for Lohaghat by bus, but they could not get seats in the only bus that left every morning. It took a lot of persuasion by Swami Gambhiranandaji to make the manager of the bus service agree to run an extra trip at 1 p.m. to Lohaghat. Finally, they reached Lohaghat at 8.30 p.m. In those days there were hardly 3 or 4 tea shops at the Lohaghat bus stand. They had to carry the entire luggage to one of the tea shops, leave it there, and start walking to Mayavati with their torches on. It was pitch dark. Gambhiranandaji was leading the way. Being new to the place Smarananandaji was just following him. At one place they came across a fork in the road. Gambhiranandaji stopped for a while and Smarananandaji asked him, 'Maharaj, have you lost the way?' He didn't reply then, but later on told the Ashrama inmates, 'You see, I have been coming here for the last 10 years, and this boy was asking me whether I lost the way!' They reached the Ashrama at 10.15 pm.

Days went by happily. It occurred to Smarananandaji that they were living in a dream world: The snow peaks of the Himalayas, the evergreen forests of deodar and pine, the rhododendrons in bloom in spring setting the forests ablaze as it were. Playing badminton, the evening walks in a group, occasional trekking on Sundays with the Manager Swami, preparing various kinds of dishes like, pancakes, etc., kept everyone engaged and cheerful. Of course, the blood-sucking leeches in the rainy season, were perhaps the only pain-givers. They sucked blood and left, but the blood went on dripping. One became aware of it when the hot blood wetted their clothes! One day Swami

Gambhiranandaji came for breakfast but very soon went to his room. The monks were wondering—what was the matter?— a leech had climbed up Maharaj's back and the cloth was blood-stained. He went to change his clothes.

On a rainy day in June, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mr. C.B. Gupta visited them with a big retinue. He was a great admirer of Swami Vivekananda and was anxious to see the room where Swamiji stayed when he visited Mayavati in January 1901. Mr. Gupta was led upstairs and was shown Swamiji's cubicle which Smarananandaji was now occupying. He had put his small suitcase over the table, covered it with an ochre cloth and placed a folder containing the pictures of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother and Swami Vivekananda. Mr. Gupta, with great devotion, prostrated himself before the pictures! In Advaitic Mayavati this was sacrilege! The next day, Swami Gambhiranandaji, after the night class, pointing to Smarananandaji, said, 'Jayaram has arranged a shrine in his room, and Guptaji did a "Pranam" there!' The very next day, the holy pictures went inside the suitcase, instead of staying over it!

Smarananandaji would fondly recall another incident: "In the summer of 1961, one Prof. Malkani came there with the intention of staying for 15 days. In the evenings he would join us for walks. One day he told me, 'Swamiji, your plants are not as harmless as they appear to be.' I asked him with a smile, 'Why, what happened?' 'Well, I picked up a leaf to put into my flower vase, but it stung me,' he said. I began to laugh and said, 'Could you not get any other better leaf or flower for the purpose? Actually you have picked up the poisonous nettle, which is commonly found in the hills.'

As days passed by, Smarananandaji and one or two other inmates were eagerly waiting for winter to witness the first snowfall in their lives. On a Sunday in December 1961, they were thinking of going for a long trek to the fort in Bishung village. But Swami Manananandaji, the Manager, said: 'The sky is heavily overcast and who knows—there may be a snowfall. So better not to take a risk.' His words came true. It started snowing most unexpectedly on December 17, 1961. Smarananandaji remembered the incident thus: "The monks were having their lunch. Suddenly the cook came running and shouted, *baraf girta hai*—'Snow is falling'. They quickly mopped up their lunch and ran outside. Already the ground had turned white. Snowflakes, like loose cotton, were falling slowly. Everything was still. There was not a

whisper, even from the trees. The snowing continued till the next evening—that is, for nearly thirty hours. The following day being *ekadashi*, in the evening there was *Ramanama-sankirtana*. The editor Swami who was tired of snow and the cold weather, told Smarananandaji: ‘Sing *Ramanama* nicely, so that the snowfall stops.’ After the *Ramanama* when they came out they found that the snowfall had indeed stopped. The whole place glittered white, the moon shining over everything. It was a bright fortnight. What a wonderful scene! Everything was dazzling white—even the trees. The whole landscape had turned into a fairyland. The snow was 20 inches deep at the Ashrama.

The next day, the monks rolled the snow over the badminton court and made a 4-ft-high snowman. Swami Ananyanandaji decorated him with eyes and a moustache, and thrust a flag in his hand with the inscription *Om tat sat*!

Ananyanandaji, informed Swami Gambhiranandaji, that he was to go to Delhi for treatment and could not continue any more as the editor. So Gambhiranandaji wired to Smarananandaji to proceed to Calcutta with all the *Prabuddha Bharata* papers. Accordingly Smarananandaji left Mayavati on January 12, 1962 and came back in April with Swami Chidatmanandaji, the new editor.

In 1963, the Birth Centenary of Swami Vivekananda was celebrated in India and abroad. The Mayavati Advaita Ashrama also celebrated Swamiji’s Birth Centenary in early 1963, at Lohaghat Bazar, Lohaghat College, Champavat Tehsil, Almora, and in a college hall at Pithoragarh. A meeting was also held at the Advaita Ashrama where distinguished persons from the town were present. Swami Smarananandaji played a major role in organizing these functions.

One interesting incident happened this year, which was narrated by Smarananandaji thus: “It is not unusual to lose one’s way in the forests of the hills. In September 1963 Swami Chidatmanandaji, Swami Yogasthanandaji (Sanat Maharaj) and an elderly gentleman aged 72, who had come from Calcutta, set out to see the Lohaghat point, about 1½ miles from the Ashrama. The others being new, I was their guide. I said that we all should take our umbrellas as thick clouds were gathering. Chidatmanandaji said it was not necessary. However, I took my umbrella and we started walking slowly because of the old man. Halfway up it began to drizzle. Swami Chidatmanandaji said that he and Yogasthanandaji would return to the Ashrama quickly and the way was known to him. Soon the drizzle became a downpour. The old man

could not walk faster. So I was with him while the two Swamis disappeared from sight. Finally, when I reached the Ashrama, I found to my surprise that two Swamis had not reached as yet. They both had missed the way. In the darkness and the rain they were to be located. I sent two servants to look for them, but they went up a little and started shouting 'Swamju, Swamju!' They were of no help. I then sent Hayat Singh, the compounder at our hospital, who was a crisis man. He went up the hill and from the shouts of the Swamis, he could locate that they were at a place called 'old Dharamgarh', at a distance of two miles from the Ashrama! Hayat Singh and two others left with petromax lamps to escort the swamis. Finally they all reached the Ashrama at 10.30 pm Swami Chidatmanandaji gifted Rs.100/- to Hayat Singh for this rescue operation."

In July 1963, Gambhiranandaji wanted Smarananandaji to go back to Calcutta. But Smarananandaji wanted a leave to make pilgrimages to Amarnath, Kedarnath and Badrinath. Gambhiranandaji granted this request. Smarananandaji started his trip from New Delhi on 24<sup>th</sup> July 1963. They stayed at the Narayan-ashrama in Srinagar and from there started their trekking to Amarnath via Pahalgam. On reaching Amarnath, they had a dip in the icy Amarganga and entered the Amarnath cave. They felt blessed to have *darshan* of the snow-white ice-linga. It was the *rakhi poornima* day; sitting in a corner of the cave Maharaj chanted the *Shiva Mahimna stotra*. Returning to Srinagar they again stayed in the Narayan-ashrama. He learnt at Srinagar that Swami Sambuddhanandaji had come there with Shri Karan Singh to participate in a program commemorating Swamiji's Birth Centenary. Next they came to Pathankot and then proceeded to two *Shakti Peeths*: Maa Vrajeshwari in Kangra valley and Maa Jwalamukhi. After praying at the Golden Temple in Amritsar they reached Kankhal. The next leg of the trip was to Kedarnath via Rudraprayag, Karnaprayag, and Gauri-kund. Finally, after *darshan* at Badrinath they returned to Kankhal. During this trip in the Himalayas he visited a number of other shrines too. In mid-October 1963, Smarananandaji was at Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta.

Heavy work awaited him here as the Birth Centenary of Swami Vivekananda was being actively celebrated throughout the country and there was heavy demand for Advaita Ashrama publications. In the midst of this he was down with dengue fever. This left him weak, but the work had to go on! He would remember an incident that happened at the Centenary Celebration. As narrated by him: "The main

programme conducted by the Central Committee of the Celebrations, was held at the Park Circus Maidan. One day Pandit Omkarnath Thakur, a great Hindustani Classical Vocalist, was to sing. From the dais Panditji introduced himself saying, 'I had the good fortune of singing in the centenary celebration of the **father** (Sri Ramakrishna) in 1936 and now I have the blessed privilege of singing in the centenary celebration of the **son** (Swami Vivekananda) in 1963.'

In October 1963 Swami Gambhiranandaji joined the Headquarters at Belur Math as one of the Assistant Secretaries. Swami Chidatmanandaji (Alopi Maharaj) succeeded him as the President of Advaita Ashrama. In December 1966 Smarananandaji was made Manager of the Advaita Ashrama, in place of Swami Advayanandaji (Ardhendu Maharaj) who took charge as head of Kamarpukur centre.

In 1968, in commemoration of the Platinum Jubilee of Swamiji's speeches at the Chicago Parliament of Religions, a book exhibition was organized at the Calcutta Information Centre on September 11. It was inaugurated by the then Governor of West Bengal Shri Dharama Vir and presided over by the great historian Dr. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar. Swami Gambhiranandaji gave the welcome speech. Many dignitaries of Calcutta were also present. The exhibition continued for a week and was a grand success. There were requests from some institutions like *Bangiya Sahitya Parishad*, *Jadavpur University*, etc. to extend the exhibition and also to organize such an exhibition on their campus. However, that did not materialise owing to shortage of manpower. The whole programme was conducted under the able leadership of Smarananandaji. He was also instrumental in adding many important books to the Advaita Ashrama library. For this he visited the Oxford University Press bookstall and other places in Calcutta.

In December 1968 Smarananandaji escorted Swami Ananyanandaji to the Christian Medical College Hospital, Vellore, (Tamil Nadu) for a health check-up. From there he embarked on a South Indian pilgrimage, visiting many prominent places. Swami Chidatmanandaji joined the Headquarters as an Assistant Secretary in January 1969. Swami Budhanandaji became the President of the Advaita Ashrama.

During his stay at Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, he learnt Bengali remarkably well. For this he read classical Bengali literature extensively, particularly the prose work of Rabindranath Tagore, which he remembered in his advanced years too. Besides his mother tongue Tamil, he was fluent in English. Marathi and Hindi he learnt well, while

staying at Nasik and Bombay. And lastly he learnt Bengali. A multilinguist indeed!

Two of his initiatives undertaken during this time are worth mentioning: (i) In 1967 the *Akhil Bharat Vivekananda Yuva Mahamandal* was founded when West Bengal was going through trying times. Youth particularly bore the brunt of this. To counter this onslaught, the *Yuva Mahamandal* was started inconspicuously by instilling Swamiji's ideas and ideals in these lost young minds. This institution is thriving today attracting and inspiring thousands of youth. (ii) *The Vivekananda Swasthya Seva Sanstha* which renders professional medical service in rural and remote parts of West Bengal, was started at his instance.

After a long period of strenuous work, in early 1973, Smarananandaji left for Mayavati, via Vrindaban, to have a little rest for 3 months. To the extreme good fortune of the Mayavati inmates, in April 1973 Revered President Maharaj Swami Vireshwaranandaji, and Swamis Abhayanandaji, Dayanandaji, Bhuteshanandaji, Hitanandaji, Lokeshwaranandaji, and many others arrived at Mayavati. It was a great event for Mayavati Advaita Ashrama, with so many senior Swamis visiting in a group. Of course, Smarananandaji had a very busy time! But it was a wonderful time nonetheless. Swami Hitanandaji said to Smarananandaji that he once stayed at Uttarkashi, but the spiritual atmosphere at Mayavati is much more intense and palpable. In 1975, Smarananandaji was most of the time at Mayavati, supervising the construction of a 20000-gallon water reservoir. It was during this time that he encountered a Himalayan leopard.

In July 1976, Smarananandaji assumed charge of the Ramakrishna Mission Saradapitha, Belur Math. The founder-Head of the centre Swami Vimuktanandaji, a disciple of Swami Shivanandaji Maharaj, had passed away and ever since, the institution was facing many administrative problems. The tumultuous condition persisted despite frequent changes of the head. Thus began a new chapter in the life of Swami Smarananandaji. Taking the bull by the horns, he proved to be a roaring success as head of this huge institution. There are many who reminisce about this golden period at Saradapitha.

His first task here was to tune the life of the monastic inmates. Regular scriptural classes were introduced; he himself would conduct some classes, separately for the newly joined *brahmacharins* and other monastics, at fixed times everyday. To foster brotherhood,

Smarananandaji introduced a monthly *Sadhu Meet*, which all monastics would attend. He formed a *Kali-kirtan* group at Saradapitha. Smarananandaji would say that after his coming to the Saradapitha a number of devotees approached him, to restart *Sri Sri Jagaddhatri Puja*, which was stopped owing to an accident sometime earlier. Referring to a small girl who was with one of the devotees, he would say that it was as if the Divine Mother Herself approached him in the form of this girl. He requested Revered President Maharaj Swami Vireshwaranandaji, Abhayanandaji and Gambhiranandaji, the then General Secretary, for permission to restart the puja, assuring them that he would take special care to avoid mishaps. Thus *Jagaddhatri Puja* was restarted and the puja continues to this day. Even after shifting to Belur Math as an Assistant Secretary and even later as a Vice-President and then as President, his presence during the evening *aarti* of *Maa Jagaddhatri* was always a gracious blessing.

An interesting incident happened during one *Jagaddhatri Puja*. A police Superintendent had come to Saradapitha to meet the Secretary Swami. Smarananandaji was in his office along with another well-built not-so-old sadhu. During his Saradapitha days, Maharaj was a little on the leaner side. The police officer thinking that the stronger looking sadhu was the head of the centre, went on discussing various issues with him despite being told repeatedly that he was speaking with the wrong person. At long last, he realised his mistake and then said, "Why did you not tell me earlier?" After this incident, whenever this sadhu happened to be with Maharaj, he would always remark that nobody would believe that Smaranananda was the Secretary.

A *brahmacharin* (who is a senior sadhu now) who had just joined Saradapitha recounts his experiences: On the very first day of joining, after a cup of tea in the evening, Maharaj said to me, "Come with me for a walk. I shall show you our educational institutions and familiarise you with the swamis of this centre". He started talking to me and getting all the details about my educational qualifications, my family background, etc. in a very informal manner. When we reached *Vidyamandira* or any hostel there or other departments, he would walk in and say to the Swami in charge, "This boy has joined us today" and would tell me briefly about the institution and its history. Thus he saw to it that I grasped the significance of the extraordinary service that was being rendered in Saradapitha.

After a few days Maharaj found this *brahmacharin* walking barefoot and in his simple way asked him, “What happened to your slippers? Why are you barefoot”? The novice hesitatingly told him that they were stolen on the very first day in Belur Math, outside the temple of Sri Ramakrishna. Maharaj called the *brahmacharin* who was working as his assistant in the Tattwamandira office and also the office boy and said to them, “See, this fellow does not know that thieves also come to temples to make a living! Take him to Belur bazaar and get him a pair of new slippers!” Maharaj was gifted with a keen sense of observation and concern for others.

Once a newly joined *brahmacharin* was dressing fruits for offering in the shrine. The offering was being delayed, so Maharaj peeped into the temple store to see what was delaying the puja. The new boy was struggling to dress *paniphool* and *shaakalu*. Maharaj immediately sat down, himself took the *boti* (vegetable cutter), and showed the *brahmacharin* how to dress these fruits! This was the simplicity of Smarananandaji Maharaj.

Whenever he visited Kamarpukur, Jayrambati, or other nearby centres, he would invariably take one or two *brahmacharins* with him. The *brahmacharins* too on their part would be eager to accompany him and enjoy his lively company. Even on the days when Trustees’ meetings were held, he never missed his assigned classes at the Probationers’ Training Centre. This practice continued when he was the General Secretary also. Those who attended his classes remember that he had the unique capacity to explain difficult matters in simple language and to make the topic attractive. His classes were never dull as he would often share his travel experiences and also since he was a gifted storyteller. He had a very good memory and intuitive capacity which helped in his extensive narrations.

Saradapitha was financially not very strong when Maharaj took over as its head. So, along with efforts to streamline the working of all departments, he took steps to increase the production and sale of religious items to strengthen the centre’s finances. He reorganized the production section and constructed a new building to house the sales section. These efforts soon started yielding results. He rebranded the incense sticks that were made with the name ‘*Ganga*’, improved their quality and added catchy phrases like, ‘*hand-rolled, natural, herbal, etc.*’. This made them very popular! Each packet had a teaching of the Holy Trio on it and that was a wonderful way of spreading their noble



thoughts. He initiated regular health check-ups of all staff members and in the process many tuberculosis cases were diagnosed in the incense making department! He saw to it they were all treated promptly.

He repaired and renovated the *goshala* (dairy) so that the increased milk supply could help monastic inmates. The student strength of the Vidyamandir unit was not much then. He introduced the Higher Secondary section in *Vidyamandir*, which helped improve both, the financial position of the unit, as well as the student strength.

Tragedy struck West Bengal in 1978 in the form of unprecedented floods throwing life out of gear. Smarananandaji, along with his team of monastics and volunteers, participated in the gigantic relief operations, himself working day and night. The Ramakrishna Sangha's Second Convention was held in December 1980. Almost 10,000 delegates (lay and monastic) from India and abroad attended. Smarananandaji was a member of the Convention Committee and he also spoke in the Convention. He accommodated the major number of delegates in the educational institutions run by the Saradapitha. He also set up a huge exhibition featuring the Ramakrishna Math, in the B. Ed. college building. For organizing this he invited many specialists from Kolkata, making the effort a grand success. In 1979, on invitation from Swami Siddhatmanandaji, Head of Singapore centre, he made his first overseas trip to give a number of lectures there. At the instance of the headquarters, in 1982 Smarananandaji organized the (residential) Regional Youth Convention at Saradapitha in which hundreds of youth took part. This Youth Convention was perhaps the first of its kind. Many young boys, inspired by attending this, joined the Ramakrishna Order, dedicating themselves to a life of renunciation.

In April 1983 he was elected a Trustee of the Ramakrishna Math and a member of the Governing Body of the Ramakrishna Mission. Again in 1985, the headquarters organized the (residential) All India Youth Convention in Belur Math. Smarananandaji was one of its Executive Committee members. Once more Saradapitha accommodated several thousand youth delegates. He also organised successfully another exhibition titled *Ramakrishna Movement*.

The centenary of the founding of the *Ramakrishna Sangha* at Baranagar, was celebrated in 1986 at Belur Math on a modest scale. Smarananandaji was given the responsibility to set up an exhibition on

the *Ramakrishna Movement* on the western lawn of Ramakrishna temple at Belur Math. He gave shape to a permanent exhibition in Saradapitha on the Ramakrishna Movement, *Ramakrishna Darshan*, with the help of a professional team from Kolkata. The exhibition was of very high standard and continued for many years. In the mid-1980s he started a new unit at Saradapitha called *Samaj Sevak Sikshana Mandir* to make rural youth self-sufficient, embracing Swamiji as their role model.

Sometime in the mid-1980s, the Headquarters entrusted him with the task of recording and bringing out in cassette form, the evening *arati* songs sung in Belur Math and all our centres. With the help of Swami Sarvagananda, Swami Narendrananda, and music experts, the task was done in a very professional manner. Maharaj would normally be present during the rehearsals and recording. But his trademark simplicity was evident here also: his name would never be printed anywhere, but only Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission, Saradapitha, would be printed. Most importantly, these *aarti* cassettes along with *Ramanama-Sankirtan*, songs which were sung by Sri Ramakrishna & Swamiji rendered by established singers, *Kali-kirtan*, etc., have now reached the houses of numerous devotees and admirers. History will record that this pioneering work was the initiative of Smarananandaji Maharaj.

It was not that Maharaj just organized the recording of songs and made cassettes. He listened to songs, called the singer, and discussed music with him. He had a deep knowledge of *raag-raagini*. Once someone gave him a record containing multi-*raga* classical songs. He listened to these songs joyfully, he then called a sadhu who was adept in music, made him listen to the songs and discussed the *ragas*, etc, with him. Finally he made a recording of those songs and gifted it to the sadhu. Once during Durga Puja in Belur Math, a *brahmacharin* from the Training Centre would sing classical songs before Mother Durga after *Mangalarti*. The songs were all in different *ragas* on Saptami, Ashtami and Navami. Maharaj was then a Vice-President of the Sangha. The day after Vijaya Dashami, Maharaj called the *brahmacharin* to his room and said to him, 'You rendered *Bhairav* on Ashtami, *Lalit* and *Bhairavi* on Navami' etc. He also shared many things regarding music as *sadhana* with the *brahmacharin*, who was surprised to note the depth of Maharaj's musical knowledge and his *shraddha* for music. He could easily identify each and every *raga* just by listening once.

Swami Tapasyanandaji Maharaj, one of the Vice-Presidents of Sangha and the President of Ramakrishna Math, Chennai, attained *Mahasamadhi* on 3 October 1991. Smarananandaji Maharaj, who was sent to replace him as President of Chennai Math, assumed charge on 18 December 1991. To accommodate the ever-increasing number of devotees, he planned the construction of a huge Sri Ramakrishna Temple on the Math premises. The foundation stone of the temple was laid by Swami Bhuteshanandaji Maharaj, President of the Sangha. Another outstanding contribution during his tenure here was the formation of an All-Tamil Nadu Committee to organize annually an *All-Tamil-Nadu-Conference of Devotees* of Ramakrishna-Sarada-Vivekananda at different places in the State. Through this initiative, all the non-branch centres in Tamil Nadu were brought under the Ramakrishna Movement umbrella in the State. This made the task of spreading the message of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda easier. During the 3 years and 3 months that he continued here, he endeared himself to both monastics and devotees.

Another significant event of this time is worth narrating. In 1994, there was a proposal to sell the land property in Yelagiri (Tirupattur district, Tamil Nadu) due to maintenance problems. Maharaj decided to stay in that remote place for ten days to personally understand the situation. One *brahmacharin* accompanied him to look after his personal needs. Those days electricity was available only from 6.00 to 7.00 am and from 7.00 to 8.00 pm. Water was to be fetched from a well that was at a little distance and on a lower level. There was no water pump or overhead tank then. His love for austerity and solitude made him decide that Yelagiri is a beautiful and spiritually vibrant place and that our property there must not be sold. Today, Yelagiri branch is a flourishing centre of the Ramakrishna Math! Indeed Maharaj breathed life into a place that was being written off.

His services were now requisitioned at Belur Math and he joined the headquarters as one of the Assistant Secretaries (today called *Assistant General Secretary*) on 19 April 1995, after handing over charge of Chennai Math to Swami Gautamanandaji. After a couple of years in this post he took over as General Secretary of the twin institutions on 22 May 1997, the Buddha Purnima day.

Several important events marked his tenure as General Secretary. (a) As a part of the Concluding Function of the Centenary of the Ramakrishna Mission an *All India Youth Convention* was held on 3<sup>rd</sup> and

4<sup>th</sup> February 1998 followed by an *All-India Devotees' Convention* on the 7<sup>th</sup> and the 8<sup>th</sup> at the Belur Math. (b) A two-day Convention of the representatives of the unaffiliated ashramas covered by the 15 Bhava Prachar Parishads under the Ramakrishna Math, was held at Belur Math on 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> June 1998. (c) Programmes to commemorate Holy Mother's 150<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary, were conducted between 2004 and 2005 at Belur Math and various centres. (d) A number of major relief & rehabilitation programmes were undertaken under his guidance: Andhra Pradesh Cyclone Relief, Gujarat & Maharashtra Earthquake Relief, Tsunami Relief in Tamil Nadu, Flood Relief in West Bengal & Orissa. He travelled extensively both in India and abroad in his official capacity as per the demands of work, familiarising as many people as possible with the life-enriching message of Ramakrishna-Sarada-Vivekananda.

When he was the General Secretary, very often after the evening *aarti* he could be found walking in the Math precincts with some sadhu, brahmachari or devotee or with the *darwan* at the headquarters. He never cared for high and low but mixed with all freely. When one of the monks at the headquarters was to go to Brazil to take charge of a new centre there, Maharaj went to the airport with other sadhus to see him off. Again, when Swami Prabuddhanandaji came on a visit to India from San Francisco, Maharaj also went to the airport with the others to receive him.

After being at the helm of affairs of the Math & Mission for a decade, Revered Smarananandaji Maharaj took over as one of the Vice-Presidents of the Sangha on 2 May 2007, the holy Buddha Purnima day. He left for Mayavati Advaita Ashrama soon and stayed there in its quiet atmosphere till 6 June 2007. After visiting Shyamala Tal, Kankhal, Kishanpur and some other places, he came to New Delhi centre.

For the first time he gave *mantra diskha* to 48 spiritual seekers at Kamarpukur on 11 July 2007. Next he gave *mantra diksha* to 50 devotees at Jayrambati on 13<sup>th</sup> July. For the purpose of giving initiation, Maharaj travelled, in the coming year, all over the country and abroad, visiting branches of the Math & Mission and also centres under the Bhava Prachar Parishad umbrella. After the *Mahasamadhi* of Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj, Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj became the 16<sup>th</sup> President of the Ramakrishna Sangha on 21 July, 2017. The *mantra diksha* continued as before. In all Revered Maharaj blessed 75,020 aspirants with *mantra diksha*.

As Vice-President and then as President of the Order, Maharaj visited various places in India and abroad many times as stated above. Between all this, he retired to the stillness of Mayavati as often as possible. The Advaita Ashrama there beckoned him; for it was here that he got adequate time and opportunity for scriptural study, which was very close to his heart, as well as for introspection. He could never forget the charm of the snow-capped Himalayan peaks, and the flora and fauna of these hills. Again, the Narendrapur centre too was one of his favourites. Here too the dense greenery, flowering plants, birds chirping, all appealed to him immensely. Gardening was one of his favourite pastimes. One of our senior swamis from Malda recalls that when he (the swami) was to assume charge as head of the centre, Maharaj told him to pay special care to the flower garden saying that a beautiful garden always helps to provide the right ambience to an ashrama.

Maharaj was always keen that monastic inmates moulded their life with a proper routine that included *japa-dhyana*, study of scriptures, study of Ramakrishna-Sarada-Vivekananda literature, attending morning and evening *aarti* / prayer, and the like. One of the principles he liked monks to follow was: *for the work of the Sangha be as modern as needed, but in personal life be as orthodox as possible*. His own life was devoid of any show or ostentation; he encouraged others also to be simple and cheerful. His food habits were simple too with no special likes or dislikes.

As President of the Sangha he was occupied with thoughts of the *Sangha-Rupi-Ramakrishna* (Sri Ramakrishna manifesting through this Sangha). A new branch of the Mission had just been started in distant Arunachal Pradesh. Maharaj called the head of the new centre through one of his *sevaks* wanting to know how the work was progressing. The head replied that things were under control but if the government would not release the grant amounts soon, difficulties would start. Revered Maharaj said, "That is what I wanted to know". The head learnt the next day that an amount of ₹ 5 crore had been withheld for some reason, and to get the funds released, some conditions had to be fulfilled. Through Thakur's grace the problem was solved, but the swami was wondering how Revered Maharaj, sitting in Belur Math, could know about the problem that was confronting them in that distant place!

In 2021 when the world was in the grip of the Covid pandemic, one of the Order's elderly swami appealed to Maharaj from abroad, to send

a benedictory message of hope and strength for the benefit of countless suffering devotees and people at large. Revered Maharaj immediately responded.

Sometime in October 2021 he was speaking with his *sevaks*, sitting near the big open door at his quarters over looking the river Ganga. He usually sat here for about 45 minutes daily (from 10 to 10.45 am) sipping a cup of coffee and looking at the Ganga and the memorial of Sri Thakur in the Cossipore *Mahasmashan*, just across the Ganga. That day, he was reminiscing about the time he came to Saradapitha, the flood relief of 1978 and other things. After a while he said, as if soliloquising: *“Ay sharir diye Thakur jaa kaaj howar chhilow taa hoye gaychhay. Ekhon tini je ko’din raakhane”* (Thakur’s work that was to be done through this mortal frame has been completed. Now he knows as to how long more this body will last).

Swami Suvirananda, the present General Secretary of the Math & Mission, recalls that when he was a pre-probationer (a novice who has just joined) he first saw Revered Maharaj as Manager of the Advaita Ashrama. He says that when he saw Maharaj’s simplicity and humble bearing, he immediately felt at ease and was also very much impressed. Suviranandaji also remembers that when he became the General Secretary, Smarananandaji soon became the President of the Order. “Whenever I approached him with any problem, Revered Maharaj always graciously gave me the solution.” He loved the Sangha immensely and had become identified with the Sangha. When he was in a comparatively better condition at Narendrapur during his last illness, Suviranandaji had gone to enquire about his health and asked him, “Maharaj, how are you?” “I am getting well, slowly” was the feeble reply. Unfortunately he could not recover and return to Belur Math.

A daily walk in his quarters at 8 pm was part of his routine during the last few months at Belur Math. He carried a walking stick in his hand. One day thus walking he came to the edge of the staircase. One of his *sevaks* was climbing up the stairs. In a lighter vein the *sevak* said *“griheetva dandam”* (literally: carrying or holding a stick). He did not intentionally say the first portion *“vridhho yati”* (the old man walks). Revered Maharaj calmly repeated, *“tadapi na munchati aashaa-pindam”* (even then desires do not leave). (The lines are from a composition by Shankaracharya in a song goading us to give up vain desires and strive to attain the goal of life).

Once sadhus and *brahmacharins* had assembled for the daily *pranams*. Brahmachari Tushar who was initiated by Maharaj was also in the queue. When Tushar bent down to offer pranams, the sevak said to Maharaj, "Here is Tushar". Maharaj immediately responded, "Oh, that is the reason it feels so cold". (*Tushar* means snow or ice).

For quite some time Revered Maharaj had been suffering from old-age ailments. One day after his bath one of his sevaks had made Maharaj sit by the window in the President Maharaj's Quarters from where he could see the temples in Belur Math. After some time Maharaj said, "Let's go." "Where, to your room?" Maharaj said, "There is just one ROOM..the place where Thakur, Maa and Swamiji are. Let us go there. The work **here** is done." "What does **here** mean?" Maharaj replied, "Whatever was to be done in this world is over."

On 15 September 2023 Maharaj left for a trip to Kamarpukur and Jayrambati. While in Jayrambati, his health deteriorated on account of a chest infection and he was admitted to Peerless Hospital in Kolkata on 27 September. After two months, he was discharged from the hospital and taken to Narendrapur Ashrama. His health gradually improved over the next few weeks. However, on 18 January 2024, he developed a fever and there was a fall in blood pressure. He was immediately admitted to the Peerless Hospital again. From there he was moved to Seva Pratishthan on 29 January. A month later, he developed septicaemia and suffered respiratory failure, for which he was put on ventilator support on 3 March. A tracheostomy was done on 13 March. As he subsequently developed acute kidney injury, haemodialysis was started. His condition gradually became critical. Despite the best available medical treatment, he finally passed away owing to septic shock and multi-organ dysfunction on 26 March at 8.14 pm.

The sad news of the *mahasamadhi* was communicated to our centres the same night by email. The news was soon posted on the Belur Math website and published in several newspapers the following morning.

Condolences were received from many dignitaries, including the following: Smt. Droupadi Murmu, President of India; Sri Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India; Sri C V Ananda Bose, Governor of West Bengal; Sri Amit Shah, Union Home Minister; Ms Mamata Banerjee, Chief Minister of West Bengal; the Dalai Lama.

The body of Revered Maharaj was brought to Belur Math late in the night and was kept in the Cultural Hall next to President Maharaj's quarters. A large number of our monastic brothers from branch centres, and thousands of disciples, devotees, admirers and friends thronged the Math premises throughout the night and the next day to pay their last respects and homage. On the 27<sup>th</sup> at 8.20 pm, the body of Revered Maharaj was taken in a procession to the courtyard in front of the Math Office and kept on a high platform in a decorated pandal till 8.45 pm. It was then carried in a procession to Holy Mother's ghat where it was given a ceremonial bath amidst Vedic chanting. The cremation rites which started at 9.35 pm were over by 12.45 am. A large number of monks and devotees stayed till the end of cremation.

Revered Maharaj was a voracious reader and a deep thinker. He contributed a number of articles to various journals of the Ramakrishna Order. Collecting his articles and talks, a few books have been brought out: *Smriti-Smaran-Anudhyan* and *Chintan-Manan-Anushilan* in Bengali, and *Musings of a Monk* in English.

Smarananandaji Maharaj was a many-sided genius and his contribution to the Order has been immense. He was like the humble dew, silent and unobtrusive but adding beauty and freshness to life. He touched many lives and left a lasting impression on many, monastics as well devotees, for his wisdom, simplicity, unassuming nature, sense of humour and spiritual fervour. In him, we have lost a loving father, friend and spiritual guide.

Swami Gautamanandaji says about him: "Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj was a silent but tireless worker. He was very simple and humble by nature. Though he has struggled and done great works, he never used to mention those to anyone."

His *mahasamadhi* has left a huge void that is difficult to fill.

